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ABSTRACT

A comparative study examined the literacy habits and attitudes of children in two sixth-grade classrooms in Hawaii, one with a learning-centered instructional approach and the other with a traditional transmission instructional approach. The majority of the 26 students in the learning-centered classroom and the 24 students in the traditional classroom were a mix of Polynesian, Caucasian, and Asian students who spoke "Pidgin" or Hawaii Creole English as their first language. The learning-centered classroom was characterized by practices that promoted shared expectations and co-ownership of the curriculum; a sense of camaraderie; collaborative learning; independent learning; high self-esteem; and high levels of motivation. The traditional classroom was characterized by practices that emphasized teacher-centered expectations, and used commercially produced programs and evaluation methods. Students completed a 40-item Likert survey at the end of the school year. Results indicated that students in the learning-centered classroom were more likely than their counterparts in the traditional classroom to: (1) perceive themselves as able learners; (2) like to go to the school library; (3) feel positive about learning through a variety of experiences; and (4) like reading all kinds of books so they could learn new things. Results also indicated that only 10% of the children in the learning-centered classroom and only 15% of the children in the traditional classroom often go to the library with their parents. Findings suggest support for the hypothesis that children who learn through a learning-centered approach develop positive literacy habits and attitudes. (Contains nine references.) (RS)

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"I USED TO THINK READING SUCKED!": PROMOTING POSITIVE LITERACY HABITS AND ATTITUDES IN THE ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM

by

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Introduction

The central element of quality education is, of course, the teacher. Knowledgeable teachers are the core of an effective school program. (Stevenson, 1987, v)

The notion of a learning-centered classroom community is currently the focus of a three-year study of literacy curriculum development at the sixth grade level. This paper will present a brief overview of the first two years of the study including (a) the teaching practices implemented and (b) the literacy attitudes and habits that developed within this environment, and the findings of the third year, which focused on a comparative study of the literacy habits and attitudes of children in two sixth grade classrooms, one with a learning-centered instructional approach and the other with a traditional transmission instructional approach.

Theoretical Perspective

In recent years, there have been calls to move away from transmission models of learning and teaching, which emphasize the learner's passive receipt of knowledge, to models that emphasize the learner's active construction of an understanding of the world (see Au, 1993). Invitational education is a collaborative approach to learning and teaching that is founded on the premises that "people are able, valuable, and responsible and should be treated accordingly" and "potential can be best realized by places, policies, and programs that are intentionally designed to invite development, and by people who are intentionally inviting with themselves and others, personally and professionally" (Purkey & Novak, 1984, p. 2).

Research examining the relationship between academic success and self-esteem lends support to this self-concept approach to learning and teaching. Coopersmith (1967) found that a child's self-perception, based on attitudes of approval or disapproval, shapes the extent to which the child believes herself or himself to be capable, significant, successful, and worthy. In short, high self-esteem leads to academic and social success, while low self-esteem works to the contrary (see also Fisher & Beer, 1990). In keeping, Routman (1991) underscores the importance of developing a happy, nurturing community where the teacher shares with the learner the enjoyment and success of the language learning experience and where listening, speaking, writing, reading, viewing, shaping, and moving continue naturally without interruption throughout the whole day (see also Maaka, 1994; Purkey & Stanley, 1991; Short & Burke, 1991). The establishment of such an environment is contingent upon components such as the active involvement of all students, regardless of ability levels; collaboration instead of competition, including the teaming of teachers, students, and parents; the presentation of subject matter that is integrated across the curriculum and that is interesting and pertains to the lives of students; a variety of instructional methods designed to cater to all learning needs; an emphasis on risk taking and feeling successful; and the treatment of students as self-motivated and invested learners.

Background to the Study

Work on this long term study began in the fall of 1994 in response to concerns that

traditional transmission models of instruction, which adopt a prescriptive "one size fits all" approach to education, were ineffective for sixth grade children at a Hawaii Department of Education elementary school. Specifically, many of the children were displaying poor work habits and negative attitudes towards all aspects of the school program and, as such, were on a clear trajectory to academic failure at the secondary school level. In an attempt to address this situation, the teacher and co-researcher began to redefine the curriculum in terms of a learning-centered community.

In the first year, practices that invited co-ownership of the classroom program were developed and implemented. It was anticipated that these practices would promote each child's feelings of positive self-worth and shared responsibility for success in learning. Data were gathered through student interviews and a teacher's journal of observations on student participation, performance, attitudes, and concerns; organizational plans and decisions; and teacher interests and concerns. Within this environment the teacher observed that the children's motivation to participate in the classroom program increased, standards of work improved, and abilities to work independently and take responsibility for their learning improved.

In the second year, a forty-statement Likert scale survey (described in the Method Section) designed to examine patterns in the students' literacy habits and attitudes was administered at the beginning and again at the end of the school year. For items addressing students' (a) learning experiences at school, (b) interest in literacy program components, (c) reading and speaking in class, (d) literacy habits and attitudes outside of the formal literacy program, and (e) learning interactions with others, notably greater percentages of students at the end of the year responded positively than at the beginning of the year.

In the third year, the same forty-statement Likert scale survey was administered in order to compare the literacy habits and attitudes of children in two sixth grade classes, one class with a learning-centered instructional approach (Classroom A) and the other with a traditional transmission instructional approach (Classroom B). It was hypothesized that, after a year of instruction, the children in Classroom A would display more positive literacy habits and attitudes than the children in Classroom B. (A detailed description and discussion of this study follows)

Method

Setting

Classroom A (twenty-six students) was in a school attended by approximately 600 children and Classroom B (twenty-four students) was in a school attended by approximately 800 children. The children at both schools came from a range of socio-economic backgrounds, although most were from lower/middle income families. The ethnic composition of the student body was very diverse, with the majority of students being a mix of Polynesian, Caucasian, and Asian. A large percentage of the students spoke "Pidgin" or Hawaii Creole English as their first language and often struggled with the standard English requirements of the formal

schooling system. Parental involvement in the school program was minimal, possibly because their own experiences as students may not have been positive.

Procedure

Classroom A - Learning-Centered Approach: This classroom was characterized by practices that promoted (a) shared expectations and co-ownership of the curriculum, including planning the classroom space and establishing rules/regulations; (b) a sense of camaraderie and community pride through daily group meetings; (c) a non-competitive, collaborative learning and teaching environment involving the co-planning of integrated, literature-based, thematic units of study, including choices of books, activities, assessment methods, field trips, and displays; (d) independent learning by encouraging the children to take risks and seek their own answers to problems (e.g., through the use of resources such as computers, peers, parents, books, and videos); (e) high self-esteem, including attempts by the teacher to have some form of positive, supportive interaction with each child, every day; (f) effective methods of assessment that supported children's learning; and (g) high levels of motivation through the enthusiastic and fun-filled exploration of the world of knowledge.

Classroom B - Transmission Approach: This classroom was characterized by practices that (a) emphasized teacher-centered expectations, rules/regulation making, and classroom planning; (b) utilized commercially produced programs, (e.g., basal readers and workbooks) that de-emphasized collaboration in learning and discouraged student input, planning, and independent problem solving; and (c) included commercially produced assessment methods (e.g., basal worksheets) that did not always address the specific interests and needs of the children.

Likert-scale Survey: The survey had students rate forty descriptive literacy-related statements as being "A lot like me," "Sometimes like me," or "Not like me at all." It was designed to examine patterns in the students' literacy habits attitudes and habits by seeking information such as the students' (a) perceptions of themselves as learners, (b) evaluations of their literacy programs, including teaching approaches and opportunities to read and write, (c) feelings about learning individually and with others, (d) abilities to self-motivate and readiness to take responsibility for their learning, (e) levels of self-esteem and pride in their literacy learning, and (f) accounts of the support they received from their parents. The survey was administered to children in both classrooms at the end of the school year.

Findings and Significance

An examination of the sixth grade responses from Classroom A and Classroom B revealed interesting information that supported the hypothesis that the learning-centered curriculum, which is anchored in the assumption that people are valuable, able, and responsible, positively impacts children's literacy learning experiences.

The children in Classroom A were more likely than their counterparts in Classroom B to perceive themselves as able learners as evidenced by the number who responded with "A lot

like me" (differences of 15 percentage points or more) to the items "I am good at all school subjects," "I like to speak in front of the class," and "I am good at writing". However, it was interesting that more children in Classroom B liked to read out loud in class. In their evaluation of their literacy programs, including teaching approaches and opportunities to read and write, higher percentages of children in Classroom A (differences of 12 percentage points or more) said that they liked the class writing activities, liked to read books about things they knew, liked to read all kinds of stories, liked the stories read in class, often used a dictionary to find out the meanings of new words, and liked to learn how to spell new words. All the children in Classroom A reported that they liked to go to the school library, as opposed to 85 percent of the children in Classroom B.

Similarly, the children in Classroom A were more likely than their counterparts in Classroom B to feel positive about learning through a variety of experiences, including working individually and with others. More children in Classroom A (differences of 20 percentage points or more) reported that liked to read with other children, liked it when the teacher read the stories they wrote, and liked it when the teacher asked them questions about what they had read. Similarly, higher percentages (differences of 15 percentage points or more) of children in Classroom A said that they liked it when other children read the stories they had written, liked to read alone, and liked to talk about their reading with the teacher and their friends.

An examination of responses relating to the children's abilities to self-motivate and take responsibility for their learning revealed that more children in Classroom A than Classroom B (differences of 20 percentage points or more) liked to read all kinds of books so they could learn new things, liked to write stories and poems at home, tried hard because they wanted to understand what they had read, felt good when they found a book they liked, and liked to write letters to their friends and relatives. In response to the statement "I only read when the teacher says I have to," 10 percent of the children in Classroom A and 38 percent of children in Classroom B responded with "A lot like me." The responses to the items relating to students' levels of self-esteem and pride in literacy learning revealed an interesting change in the pattern of responses with more children in Classroom A than Classroom B noting that, although they were proud of their reading, they were more inclined to get nervous about their reading or worry that people might think they were poor readers (differences of 10 percentage points or more).

Perhaps the most alarming finding related to the children's reporting of parental support for their literacy learning. In response to the statement "I often go to the library with my parents," only 10 percent of the children in Classroom A and 15 percent of the children in Classroom B responded with "A lot like me," and 25 percent of the children in Classroom A and 39 percent in Classroom B reported that their parents often read and wrote with them at home.

Concluding Comments

The results of this comparative study support the hypothesis that children who learn

through a learning-centered approach, with its emphasis on promoting co-ownership of the curriculum, collaboration rather than competition, independence in and responsibility for learning, high self-esteem, effective methods of instruction and assessment that support individual needs, and high levels of motivation for learning are more likely to develop positive literacy habits and attitudes than children who learn through a traditional transmission approach, with its emphasis on teacher-direction and student passivity in learning.

The true value of this project lies not so much in the pursuit of an end goal, but rather in an empowerment to change or to maintain practices as deemed appropriate. While it is apparent that a learning-centered approach strongly supports children's literacy development, there are concerns that still need to be addressed, namely the implementation of a school-wide learning-centered curriculum that will ensure a continuity of learning experiences and the involvement of parents in the learning and teaching of their children. In conclusion, the findings of this study are congruent with the tenet that the core of an effective classroom program is knowledgeable teachers who have the expertise and inclination to encourage all children to reach their potentials.

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